Place, race and environment in the poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh

Agnes S. K. Yeow

University of Malaya

Published online: 29 Sep 2014.

To cite this article: Agnes S. K. Yeow (2014): Place, race and environment in the poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh, Textual Practice, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2014.955821

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2014.955821

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly
The poetry of Malaysian poet Muhammad Haji Salleh is underpinned by notions of an authentic, Malay place-based relationship with the environment and runs the risk of alienating non-Malay communities in the post-colonial land. Nevertheless, on closer inspection of his work, it becomes clear that the poet’s representation of ancient Malays and the Malay sense of place as an indigenous model for an earth-honouring existence is in fact fraught with tensions and contradictions. Muhammad’s grappling with the question of roots and a return to roots ultimately paves the way for a more transnational and inclusive ethics of place.

**Keywords**

Place; race; environment
One of the primary objections raised by postcolonial critics concerning green readings of postcolonial texts is the seemingly apolitical and parochial inflections of these readings themselves. Also, ecocriticism’s focus on place attachment and bioregionalism does not sit well with postcolonial concerns: for instance, the ecocritical privileging of place and rootedness does not chime with the postcolonialist focus on routes rather than roots, diaspora rather than belonging, hybridity rather than purity and fragmentary rather than unitary place and community. This, among other factors, has prompted scholars from both critical schools to reflect over the fundamental schism between the two critical methods while acknowledging common ground between the two (for instance, their mutual interest in the relationship between landscape and power) and to formulate more fruitful ways in which a green postcolonialist discourse can shed important light on issues surrounding the land and the interaction between people and the places they inhabit. As Graham Huggan notes, the ‘productive overlap’ between the two perspectives offers ‘food for political thought’. One such overlap is the issue of place identification and attachment especially when place also involves national space and national belonging. To bring postcolonialism and ecocriticism together in this respect is to examine the relation between place, race and environment. In this essay, I wish to examine the poetry of the Malaysian poet-laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh with these themes in mind while taking cognisance of some of the difficulties brought about by the critical greening of postcolonial literature. Muhammad is a poet whose interest in real-world environmental issues is apparent; however, his fears about environmental crisis are expressed almost exclusively through his race-inflected representation of the Malays and their geographical and cultural world which immediately poses problems. Etienne Balibar notes that “peoples” do not exist naturally any more than “races” do, either by virtue of their ancestry, a community of culture or pre-existing interests’ and that ‘heritage’, ‘ancestry’ and ‘rootedness’ are ‘all signifiers of the imaginary face-to-face relation between man and his origins’. Invoking race as an identifying cultural marker in his poetry, Muhammad assumes that his ‘people’ have roots or originate in a place which is itself identified as ‘Malay’. Indeed, his preoccupation with Malay roots in relation to place leads to perhaps the most troubling aspect of his poetry: the depiction of a landscape where migrant non-Malays and the indigenous tribal peoples (the orang Asli) are conspicuously absent. If, as the poetry suggests and takes for granted, Malays from time immemorial have had intimate relations with the land (thus ‘legitimising’ their rightful place in it) and would do well to recuperate this intimacy in the face of present-day ecological and cultural challenges, does this imply that migrant, later inhabitants or even indigenous tribal groups do
not share this longstanding affinity with and allegiance to the land and are therefore not unlike the non-resident tourist who feels no visceral connection to the land? Such a racialised discourse tends to focus on notions of authenticity by invoking Malay ancestral links to the land and assumptions of high regard for the land. This aspect of his work clearly provides fodder for a postcolonial critique of place especially in his portrayal of Malays as being essentially identified with place and the natural world therein: a rooted, place-based eco-cultural identity which, in effect, marginalises those identities which are caught in diaspora. However, while the postcolonial reading is viable and important, this essay will show that the poet’s representation of a Malay sense of place as an indigenous model for an earth-honouring existence is in fact fraught with tensions and contradictions. In the course of valorising ‘the importance of tradition, continuity and pride in identity and connections with others in the Malay world’, the poet grapples with anxieties that threaten to disturb rather than reify the idea of a natural and pure Malay place-sense that the poetry tends to idealise. As such, in spite of the cracks evident in Muhammad’s avid decolonising project (a project reflected in his recurring tropes of return to and reclamation of a perceived ‘lost’ or displaced Malay identity, ‘in fact our lost selves’, ‘roots’ in relation to place), there is more to the poetry than a racialised and narrow portrayal of Malays and the world they lay claim to. I argue that ultimately his work articulates an ethic of place and responsibility which goes beyond a solely race-based affinity with place and even of region because as region, the pan-Malay archipelago/world may also conjure a monocultural space and descend into the ‘shadow of extreme regional identification’. To his credit, Muhammad’s work contributes to the reimagining of the land as vulnerable to the ravages of both human history and the human discourses of nature. His work ultimately does not promote an unqualified return to a sense of place based on an unchanging traditional relation with nature but instead promotes a stewardship of the land and transnational spaces which is based on the idea of a shared space of collective duty and responsibility.

In an interview, Muhammad describes the trauma felt by the Malays during and after the colonial period as one characterised by a de-valueation of their relationship with place and induced by the changes sweeping the nascent nation:

... the political rupture and trauma of being ruled by people thousands of miles away. As a young boy growing up in Bukit Mertajam I know I felt the Malays were a people without a voice. Our closeness to nature, to life in the kampong, our very self-sufficiency were assets that were written off in those times. The social changes, the fight
against communism, the strategies to bring the different races together in a political party, Independence – these were traumatic experiences for us.\textsuperscript{7}

The poet also clearly attributes these upheavals to the onset of modernity as shown in his reference to ‘the traumatic years of the 1920’s, when the modern world had rushed into the towns and the villages of Malaya and the Archipelago, and its real impact was slowly seeping into their [the Malays’] consciousness and way of life’.\textsuperscript{8} Ever-conscious of these changes, Muhammad often writes in a nostalgic vein as evident in his analysis of the foremost Malay-world poetic form, the pantun:

\begin{quote}
Nature is the closest neighbour to the Nusantara [Malay Archipelago] man. . . . The images most present in the poems are undoubtedly the flora and fauna. Each day the peasant goes to his field to plant and care for the padi, to the orchards or vegetable gardens, or if he lived close to the sea or river he caught fish, and if he was close to the forest he went hunting. All these activities put him on an intimate contact with these parts of nature. He did not only observe nature but learned to understand its ways by interpreting signs, sounds and also behaviour.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Statements like the ones above suggest that the poet accepts the assumption that the Malays’ sense of self and place is tied inextricably to nature, village life and self-sufficiency and that these features of the Malays are positive qualities (‘assets’) specific to a particular community. One of these assets may well be the kind of ecological knowledge that can only come with a long history of living-in-place. However, as the ordained spokesperson for a once voiceless and dispossessed people and playing a vital role in imagining the nation and its aspirations, Muhammad runs the risk of celebrating a romantic Malay past or heritage in a mode which tends to naturalise the idea of Malays as belonging to the Malay Archipelago and essentialise them as nature-loving and nature-fearing. In referring to Bukit Mertajam, ‘closeness to nature’, ‘[closeness to] life in the kampong’ and ‘self-sufficiency’, Muhammad reinforces the stereotypical idea of Malay attachment to place and identification with a pastoral ethos as if these assumptions in themselves constitute a timeless, stable and authentic Malay way of life, identity and place-sense, constructions of which have been contested by Malay-world scholars.\textsuperscript{10} Joel Kahn has remarked on the kampung dream of Malay nationalism: the image of ‘the Malay rural settlement or kampung, the presumed \textit{locus classicus} of traditional Malay culture’.\textsuperscript{11} Pointing to ‘the importance of travel, commerce and mobility’ in the
lives of the diverse Malays in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he notes:

These were not the sedentary, self-sufficient, even anti-commercial cultivators and moral economists who people the kampung dream . . . While the kampung dream conjures up images of a precolonial Malay Peninsula populated by subsistence-oriented, communally minded peasants with ancient ties to the land, and particularly to their sawah (wet rice fields), in fact the Malay Peninsula in the 19th century seems at first sight to be a poor source of such a dream.12

Kahn attributes this to the fact that the peninsula at the time was sparsely populated and that the people who were subsequently known as Malays themselves were part of a mobile Malay world which saw the influx of immigrants from China and India and movements of people from among the islands of the archipelago. He adds:

Contrary to the image circulating in Malay nationalist narratives of an indigenous population of village-based, subsistence-oriented Malays being swamped by more developed and advanced European and Chinese capitalists, settlers and labourers on the Malay Peninsula, in fact these Malay peoples were already part of a trans-border community and a vibrant commercial economy in the Malay world.13

Malay-world historians and scholars corroborate on this point about trans-border movements especially when borders themselves were porous and tended to shift. For instance, Leonard and Barbara Andaya note that the political history of the precolonial Malay world was characterised by flux and not fixity, pointing to the ‘cyclical pattern of alternating unity and fragmentation which had characterized Malay-Indonesian commerce and politics for well over a thousand years’.14 Commenting on the Malay literary classic The Malay Annals, a chronicle of the fifteenth-century Malay sultanate of Malacca (the city then renowned as an entrepôt linking China to India and the rest of the world) and a significant source text for Muhammad himself, Khasnor Johan states that ‘the Malay worldview embraced the notion of an expansive but interconnected world as befitting a trading and probably, widely-travelled elite’: a world ‘less constrained by political and physical boundaries and thus encouraging greater mobility and wider mental horizons’.15 This history of intra-archipelagic migration and diaspora suggests a fragmented rather than a unitary sense of place among the ancestral Malays. Given the itinerant character of
the Malay-world peoples then, uncritical claims of long settlement and ancient links to the land are problematic.

However, it is my point that the poet’s desire to reconnect with a perceived ancestral identity and its assumed ethic of harmonious co-existence with nature is not as straightforward as it looks: a point which I will return to presently. In the poem ‘return’, the persona desires to re-inhabit his lost place, becoming in the poem ‘return’, ‘once again a malay, / rooted’, ‘secured by values, / ways’ which, it is presupposed, reflect the traditional ‘closeness to nature’ lost to his community. To become ‘once again a malay’ suggests that, at its heart, Malay identity is unchanging and eternal, and that one could return to it at any time and find it the same.

Muhammad’s returnee is often represented by Si Tenggang, a character from Malay folklore who leaves his homeland and makes a fortune abroad. On his return and unable to accept his humble origins, he disowns his mother and rejects his roots, hence shirking his responsibilities to family and community. In ‘si tenggang’s homecoming’, the speaker declares: ‘the journey was a loyal teacher / who was never tardy / in explaining cultures or variousness, / look, i am just like you, / still malay, / sensitive to what / i believe is good’. The expression ‘still malay’ hints at a tacit understanding of what Malay identity constitutes and of its supposedly stable set of meanings. Mohammad admits readily to being, at one time, uprooted and distanced from his own ‘cultural backyard’, having spent a significant period of time abroad studying western and other foreign literatures. This cultural backyard is set up as an abstract but constant and stable edifice, always there, untouched by time and historical circumstance, waiting for its wayward son. The trauma of return induced by a long separation or estrangement is soothed by the comforting thought that Malay identity does not alter even as other selves threaten to dislodge it. Muhammad’s conscious return to an idealised Malay past as a means of resisting the colonial devaluation of Malay culture brings to mind the classic quest for Negro-ism. In fact, in his acceptance speech at being conferred national laureate status, he makes an explicit comparison between the two projects:

In Malaysia, we are fortunate to be able to return to our own language. In several African countries and the Caribbean, the language of the colonial masters had to be perpetuated. Even so, a movement towards traditional roots like Negritude pioneered by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire brought their literature back to Africa.

In the same poem above, the returnee ‘si tenggang’ reinforces the assumption that the Malay village is the site of and standard for authentic eco-
cultural identity and wholeness, or a universal, ancestral Malay-ness as it were, and that a return to it is desirable:

the years at sea and in coastal states
have taught me to choose,
to accept only those tested by comparison,
or that which matches the words of my ancestors,
which returns me to my village
and its completeness.²⁰

However, as in the poem ‘homecoming’, the poet also presents a returnee who has seen the world and who has been irrevocably changed by that experience and would make no apology for now having ‘women and transience in [his] narrative’.²¹ In ‘at the airport’, the speaker admits that ‘it was difficult to explain / what he half-knew, / to disentangle a past / with a future . . . he left, / glad not to give reasons’.²² In fact, ‘having been changed by time and place’, the speaker of ‘si tenggang’s homecoming’ declares somewhat paradoxically: ‘i am not a new man, / not very different / from you; . . . i am you, / freed from the village, / its soils and ways, / independent, because / i have found myself’. This is a newfound selfhood set free from the confines of time and space and yet retaining his Malay identity. Though yearning nostalgically for a timeless and bounded green village, he is ‘no longer afraid of the oceans / or the differences between people’ and may likely leave yet again.²³ In fact, in his travels, the speaker discovers that local ecologies are not disconnected from global ones. In ‘standing in oxford street’, while at the heart of the erstwhile imperial centre, the speaker is reminded of the ecological destruction and injustice wrought by colonialism:

how shall we sentence
this shopkeeping race
that has sold the land and lodge
of a part of humanity
for these grand buildings here?
how shall we taste
its riches
built from the blood
of the black, red, brown and yellow peoples,
and on the deception of innocent races and their countries?²⁴

The poem ends with a vision of doom: ‘standing in oxford street / i imagine
/ the collapse of their imitators / fallen under / the arrogant / dying giant’. The ‘tourists’ from former colonies are now ‘worshipping the English /
who humiliated them for a hundred years; these imitators represent post and neo-colonial countries which now walk with their [the colonizer’s] gait / think with their syllogism / live with their values. In the ironic ‘england in the spring’, the speaker sees the dreariness and ecological displacement that industrialism engenders as a form of atonement for colonial sins:

the gray eyes of the english stare
upon the fog and history’s break-point,

sins collected
in a hundred islands and states,
must be expiated in the centre of london,
in the dirty mills of birmingham
or the newsstands of oxford.

London as a symbol of the insatiable consumption of the world’s natural resources (both nonhuman and human) in the colonial period lives on as a symbol of the overconsumption of both the west and the urban elite of poor nations as well as the unequal distribution of the world’s dwindling resources. Such a global outlook also suggests the realisation that an alternative ecological framework or model has to be formulated to engage the local–global dialectic because the insular and idealised green sensibility of the local village has obviously been powerless and inadequate against the march of material progress and global economic forces. In ‘homecoming’, the speaker describes an album of photographs which bears the marks of the toxic lives he witnessed in his travels:

dull and brown from an age determined by
the quality of chemicals:
throng at the supermarkets and shopping malls,
food, toilet-paper and paper bags
consuming the lines in their own homes,
in the end to be digested and meshed
into colours of the carnivorous tv.

The speaker predicts that overconsumption and toxicity is the future of the home place, and in ‘return’, he laments that many are rich in the country of the poor.

In fact, there is much in the poetry to suggest that Muhammad’s environmental vision is characterised mainly by his empathy for the poor as victims of ecological displacement and injustice rather than by visions of a past existence. Often, the poems which contain the most
scathing indictment of capitalist oppression make use of the ancestral village trope to highlight the injustice so that the whole idea of a return to roots becomes strategic rather than thematic. Poems like ‘the quiet village’ and ‘this hamlet’ share intertextual links with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* with its ecological omens: ‘birds are muted / by the new harshness’ and ‘sparrow songs are muted by the strange silence / seasons passionless’. The ‘new harshness’ results in the rural population’s exodus to the cities (hence, the quiet, deserted village) and the loss of livelihoods. When commercialism is an industry controlled by rich and powerful business entities and countries, the poor and marginalised segments of society suffer. In the longer version of ‘the quiet village’, we read: ‘the inhabitants are too poor ... industry is only a mark / of the satiated, / and the rubber tree is no factory, / prices come from businessmen. / when you are poor / you can’t borrow from the poor’. And so the smallholders ‘sit leaning against their houses’ stilts / feeling the force of the new grip / around their stomach / and killing them one by one / before their own eyes’. This ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (rubber is a commodity inherited from the colonial period) is not only confined to the home situation and the global South but also manifests itself in the palpable solidarity expressed by the poet for people who eke a traditional but vulnerable living from the land and sea just as their forebears had done, namely farmers and fishermen. In ‘farmers’, ‘three old men bent their backs to their land’ on an old Portuguese farm and ‘we read in this obeisance a history / and many ancient generations, / its manners and faith’. This poem bears comparison with ‘three beserah fishermen’ where ‘three small souls in a frail old sampan’ brings us back to the Malay world. In a poem simply entitled ‘fishermen’, ‘sun-blackened men’ who are ‘dry toys’ at the mercy of sea and sun are also vulnerable to the relentless march of time and, more to the point, of capital. In all these poems, the sense of a fleeting existence and tradition is pervasive, and the trope of ancient lifeways is deployed to highlight the detrimental effects of capital on land and people. In ‘the new road’, the ‘sun-darkened and old’ farmer can only look on from the fringes as his land is swallowed up by real estate development: ‘this was his land before those men in wide cars / came to persuade him in broken malay / ... they bought it, / earth that swelled rambutans, mangosteens, / they took away his generations’. The marginalising of the poor by global capital also means that places and their significance undergo change. As Madan Sarup writes:

places are not static, they are always changing. We must remember how capital moves, how places are created through capital investment. Capital is about technological change and the expansion of places. Places should always be seen in a historical and economic
context. . . . Places are created, expanded, then images are constructed to represent and sell these places.\(^{36}\)

In light of this process, the ancient village and what it stands for seem a pipe dream indeed, and Muhammad’s poetry demonstrates the evanescence of this dream.

For Muhammad then, the myths of a sacralised place-based identity and tradition have to be reconfigured to confront the challenges of newer forms of colonisation. Tellingly, the poet describes his work *The Travel Journals of Si Tenggang II* as ‘a plea for the modern [Malay] man to travel, go beyond established boundaries, to accept the principle of mixing and interacting’, not least because ‘tradition is not static; like a tree it grows new branches, lives in a place where it shares the environment with other trees, and benefits from such shared situations’,\(^{37}\) and that ‘the trouble with studying roots is that they are attached to the trunks, the branches and leaves. These leaves often end in shoots and flowers, influenced by the changing seasons’.\(^{38}\) This stance is reminiscent of Paul Gilroy’s attempt to understand his own black cultural tradition not in the ‘unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence’ but as

breaks and interruptions which suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilising flux of the post-contemporary world. New traditions have been invented in the jaws of modern experience and new conceptions of modernity produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions.\(^{39}\)

This concept of tradition is ‘a tradition in ceaseless motion – a changing same’.\(^{40}\) Indeed, in ‘On National Culture’, Fanon makes the point that ‘When a people undertakes an armed struggle or even a political struggle against a relentless colonialism, the significance of tradition changes’.\(^{41}\) Insofar as Muhammad’s own poetry demonstrates the routes that tradition takes rather than a return to static racial ‘origins’, there exists a counternostalgic discourse which unsettles the discourse of roots and cultural belonging. Arguably, in statements like ‘whether the context is in the kampong, in town, or in Hawaii the poems inevitably direct attention to what I am, who I am, the roots of my community, where it is headed’, the tension is apparent in the last clause ‘where it is headed’\(^{42}\) with its suggestion of sameness and yet mobility, contestation and change. This is further supported by his persistent description of the dynamic, mobile and cosmopolitan character of the Malay world and its classical literatures which have been cross-fertilised by influences well beyond the real or imagined borders of the Malay world.\(^{43}\) In this, Muhammad seems to present
an alternative version of a Malay ecological identity: one which is stable and yet in flux, local and yet global, and one which tempers the more rigid concepts of ecological identity which tend to favour a long-term allegiance to and occupancy of place. 44

In connection with this, it can be argued that the colonial discourse of tropical nature and Malay-ness has contributed significantly to the notion of an unchanging, ‘traditional’ Malay eco-identity. In an early poem ‘tropics’, Muhammad’s depiction of ‘brown people’ attuned to their natural surroundings seems complicit with colonial generalisations of the native or noble savage: essentially innocent, childlike, nature-loving, nature-fearing and harmonious.

here,
the red sun catches the world in its stare.
here the exploded seed of a tall parent tree climbs its way between the damp humus to the sun, to the beckoning redness.
the green world, dark and deep in the myriad leaves stretches its tendrils, breathing the air.

.......
here,
brown bodies, laughing faces
still stand smiling on the long monsoon beaches waiting for sampans, celebrating every catch.

... girls running in bateks
in the afternoon waves,
laughing
to reach the beach’s end.

here,
the water will rush at your feet

.......
but the beach is the brown people’s home,
their traditions engraved by every tide.
they speak the language of the sea birds and earth, praying only to their own God.

here,
they still dance and sing graceful

.......
and share their love in the neighbourhood.

Agnes S. K. Yeow The poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh
each tide washes the earth and
dead leaves from their backs.\textsuperscript{45}

This poem reinforces the exoticised and romanticised stereotypes of native life. Temporally, the adverb ‘still’ seems to indicate the continuity and agelessness of a tradition-bound way of life that the poet valorises. However, the final image reveals an inherent contradiction in the whole idyllic picture: the timelessness of the scene is undermined by the time-bound notion of tidal movement. In the expression ‘their traditions engraved by every tide’, we read that established traditions are influenced and determined by place (the seas), but the tide can also easily erase all marks made in the sand in the same way that it ‘washes the earth and / dead leaves from their backs’. If we read the backs of brown bodies as the metonymic blank spaces on which traditions are inscribed and from which these can be erased or transformed, then the image suggests the ebb and flow of identity rather than fixity. This image is also significant in that it disturbs the hegemonic tendency to view the tropics as a static, monolithic and stable signified. It destabilises unified and ‘traditional’ notions of tropical nature, and it allows for a continuous play and deferral of meaning. Such a strategy has obvious implications for the nation myth as well. In addition, there is much to suggest that this poem is deliberately ironic in its flagrant pandering to imported stereotypes of an edenic, tropical nature and brown peoples living in harmony with nature. This ‘strategic exoticism’\textsuperscript{46} contrasts the natives’ identification with a home place (‘the beach is the brown people’s home’) and living-in-place against the uprooted, peripatetic Europeans who arrived in the East with conquest, trade and exploitation on their minds. In the colonial period, the tropics seen as a site of hyper-fecundity and natural plenty was exploited without much ado. The poem’s ‘brown people’ and the essentialising hues of ‘black, red, brown and yellow peoples’\textsuperscript{47} in ‘standing in oxford street’ symbolise the colonial exploitation of tropical resources, human and nonhuman. Indeed, the legacy of exploitation of and dominion over the global South persists to this day as the global political and economic structure continues to control postcolonial nations and their resource-dependent economies. Read this way, ‘tropics’ with its excessively exotic and deliberate tourist-brochure image of ‘natural’ Malays in their pristine, ‘natural’ habitat serves as a vehicle for Muhammad’s critique of the commodification of tropical nature by polluting industries and of the unbridled capitalism and ecological injustice rampant in the land both in the colonial past and in the postcolonial present. The idealised world of ‘tropics’ is Muhammad’s ‘postcolonial pastoral’ which Rob Nixon defines as ‘writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of
environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies’. Arguably, the erstwhile colonial discourse of the tropics and its oppressive effects on both a local and global scale continue to exacerbate many of the environmental problems faced by the country today.

Muhammad’s zeal to challenge European and linguistically determined formations of nature and culture is also indirectly evident in statements such as ‘English colonized me, yet it was my lifeblood . . . I constantly reminded myself, and was reminded, to think, to write, to feel in my mother tongue, for my people’. The desire to resist the mindless mimicry of European ways is well and good, but it tends to drive Muhammad to an ethnocentric attitude to the land which harks back to the colonial project of locating the idealised ‘real Malay’, one aspect of which is arguably the ‘real’ Malay’s presupposed intimacy with and knowledge of the land based on a centuries-old dwelling. In ‘returning for good’, the speaker knows he is returning for good when he ‘recognise[s] the textures of earth’. In ‘story’, the storyteller with his ‘ancient mouth’ is ‘rooted to earth’, ‘implanted . . . in the marshes’, ‘chosen / elder to land and river, / children and grandchildren / to sand or water that he dug and diverted / with his dark hands’, narrating his story to ‘this young man who has lost his place’. In ‘folk healer’, the subject ‘is the grand old man of the ancient village / recognising the river with the palm of his hands’. The shaman’s ecological wisdom speaks of an inherent bond between ancestral Malays and their physical surroundings: a world which seems to yield its secrets to its legitimate descendants. In ‘blood’, the entanglement of race and place is expressed in terms of blood ties, unbroken lineage and communal piety:

the blood in me has travelled the centuries
flowed in unknown veins
crossed swampy rivers and proud straits
the loins that have borne my beginnings
stood in their past.
the great-grandfather who walked in piety
had filtered his purity into his dutch-hating son
who walked with him and with god.
they dominated their communities and traditions,
purified the ancestral mud to clean earth
and grew in its clutch children of faith
much as i owe, i am.
i am both branch
and remote stalk of this tree.

This representation of ancient environmental wisdom and direct lineage with forebears, real or imagined, inevitably privileges the sons of the
earth and marginalises the others. However, Muhammad’s image of the folk healer or shaman has also to be read in the context of the poet’s environmental poetics. In re-imagining pre-Islamic animist beliefs, he adapts the *mantera* (invocation) or ‘magical poetry’, a literary form that is based on folk beliefs, to express his ethics of place. *Manteras* (magical incantations or charms in verse form) were composed to summon, command or appease the soul-spirit dwelling in natural objects and phenomena. These incantations were recited by folk healers and shamans for many different reasons, including to cure diseases, dispel evil, influence people or events and so on:

> the *mantera* – the magic verbal formulaic incantation – is used for many purposes – among others to keep the wild animals from the crops, or one’s paths, to catch a crocodile, ... to enhance one’s looks, and to cure the many diseases that come from the swamps and the forests of the tropics.

Muhammad’s incantatory poems like ‘the forest’s last day’ convey overt environmental themes. The underlying animist basis to these poems has important implications for the relationship between place and humans. Neil Evernden notes that animism is the ‘extension of the boundary of the self into the “environment”’ and that this process ‘[imbues the environment] with life and [we] can quite properly regard it as animate – it is animate because we are a part of it’. Furthermore, an animistic position seems to suggest that all creation, animate and inanimate, possess independent moral standing. This does not necessarily suggest that Muhammad subscribes to the principles of Deep Ecology, but rather suggests that the appropriated figure of the folk healer is the poet’s trope of himself as a modern-day mediator between the human and nonhuman worlds especially in a world where ‘man has declared war / on nature’ (‘return’). The ‘shaman-poet [speaks] the rare language of man but equally understood by the spirits and animals’ so ‘that coexistence may be established’. If the *mantera* is often associated with the ritualistic curing of disease, then Muhammad’s green *manteras* also work symbolically to heal the ailing relations between community and place. ‘The forest’s last day’ is structured as a *mantera* (in its use of parallelism, the naming of the trees and by default, the spirits of the trees) and its transformative power or magic lies in the creation of environmental awareness and the expression of outrage at the destruction of the rainforest:

> death comes at the end of the chain saw
> with spears of shrieks that split the air and red of the sun
> biting into the flesh of wood
fallen is the cengal
fallen is the meranti
fallen is the merbau
fallen is the pulai

the full epic of the forest
is ended by a convoy of lorries with tyres of concrete,
a gang of paid lumberjacks who wear no pity in their eyes.
and a bloated logger
who stands on the red dessicated desert –
the world of the future

Here, the shaman-poet is reincarnated as the activist-poet confronting the contemporary ecological crisis head-on with no illusions of a static, traditional ecosystem which stands outside time and space.

As such, although the references to the village sage and Malay indigenous wisdom of the land may point to Muhammad’s desired return to a ‘lost’, pristine Malay sense of place and dwelling, his position is more ambiguous than it seems. As the title of his latest collection of poems Rowing Down Two Rivers suggests, the poet not only straddles two literary traditions, languages and consciousness (Malay and English) but also metaphorically navigates a liminal space in which terms like ‘return’ and departure are slippery and not always what they appear to be. Furthermore, the journey implicated in rowing evokes routes rather than roots. In ‘return’, the persona evokes a homecoming that ‘once again / begins questions and problems’:

arriving here
i am returned,
secured by values,
ways,
once again a malay,
rooted,
growing
or breaking.

this is a return
to the self
and home,
country and people.
this is returning
Zawiah Yahya has noted that “The land of [Muhammad’s] birth which he nostalgically romanticised on foreign shores has changed in his absence and he must negotiate these changes by first accepting them.”

Granted, the speaker here, uneasy and disillusioned though he is, seems prepared to resign himself to the adverse changes brought about by the commodification of the land: ‘the past / and the present selves / must live as neighbours, / with the change, / or break without solutions’ and ‘nature and earth / are for sale’, ‘man has declared war / on nature’. However, more importantly, the above lines imply that a Malay-ness defined by an age-old affinity with place is untenable. It is precisely because places (and the attendant human–place relation) change that there can never be a return to place-based ‘roots’ or whatever it is that it counts as roots. In fact, the returnee’s renewed bond is symbolically tenuous, ‘rooted, / growing / or breaking’, and the urge to travel stronger than ever as in the poem ‘going away’: ‘because we are travellers of sorts, / places are only stops / along a road’. Furthermore, in the concluding lines of the poem above, the trope of return is replaced by that of ‘returning’ with the crucial difference lying in its continuous action. By figuring the return (and its implied destination) as subject to time, Muhammad challenges the notion of a timeless and singular racial place-sense. In fact, if his biography of Malay spaces is mapped on to his own personal history, then this is a history of estrangement, demystification and yet familiarity. His poems of travel, departure and return suggest that identification with place is an attitude or a set of values that can be cultivated or discarded at will. Likewise, respect for the land is not an inborn communal or national trait or even an attitude guaranteed by traditional links with the land. In fact, there is a real danger in being lulled into believing in the myth of the ecological native and ecological purity while, all around, the degradation continues unabated.

It can be argued that although his environmental rhetoric and ethics implicitly focus on the recovery of a ‘lost’ racialised place attachment, it is also paradoxically bent on demystifying the potency of such a naturalised connection. The degradation of the land over history suggests long human accommodation of external and internal forces such as economics and politics in spite of purported close ties with the land. In ‘return’, we read: ‘on the roads, / are planted new roots ... greed becomes the worth of the age / and only wealth measures all’. In stark contrast to the idea of a timeless land that is ‘the brown people’s home’, the land itself is characterised as prone to change: a landscape which is re-constituted over time and by
the circumstances of history. Roots are replaceable as suggested by the ironic ‘new roots’. In ‘on a journey’ and ‘temporary’, it is the transience and flux of places and peoples that the poet ironically juxtaposes against an abiding landscape:

all land is temporary
after the fog
the road returns to its valley

beside the forests
and tall rising rocks
all paths are temporary,
beside the clean clouds
and hills mapped by the centuries,
all travellers are seasonal.

Even the landscape here mirrors the notion of the ‘changing same’. In ‘i’m going into the night’, the speaker contemplates a transient self which is equally ephemeral and elusive:

i’m going into the night
down by the coconuts
along the overgrown tracks,
there i may find me

...standing there, where night becomes water
transience becomes the still permanence.
in the dark i recognise my shape.

Resisting closure and stasis, the restless speaker-traveller in ‘nothing is ever ended’ declares: ‘i depart for destinations / each time / i step on the ground, / comfortable dreams are / splattered by the drain’s mud, / hearing the scream of suffering / in the sounds of the sweet rain’.

In ‘not mine’, the speaker describes a landscape that is foreign to him as places like Kedah, Jerai, Penang and Kelantan and the physical features of island and peninsula (‘strait’s cliffs’, ‘blue veil of hills’, ‘ranges breed mountains’) which ought to be familiar are finally ‘all alien to [him]’.

The focus on the northern states of Malaysia is even more ironic considering how Muhammad grew up in Bukit Mertajam (in the state of Penang), a northern town on the peninsula. As such, it can be argued that the dominant theme in the poetry is really the estranging effect that the landscape has on the speaker and his place-sensibilities. This uncanny or unhomely experience suggests a consciousness which is not confined to national/
racial space but ranges across many different sites around the world, namely places which figure significantly in his poetic universe because they are centres of experience which have contributed to his ongoing identity-formation: a Malay consciousness which is *en route* rather than permanently settled and contained. It can be safely argued that the deracinated returnee perceives the land as perpetually shifting ground and his representations of it suggest what Fanon describes as ‘the zone of occult instability where the people dwell’: the counterpoint to that other tendency of the native intellectual or artist to attach himself to tradition and embrace ‘knowledge which has been stabilised once and for all’.72

In fact, in ‘no eternity’, the sense of an idyllic, ancestral Malay pastoral is more dreamlike than real as the speaker metaphorically sails away from ‘the beach’ and ‘the fields’ and is awakened to reality by the splash of the waves:

however fair, the beach must be left behind.  
now, this is everything. 
if there’s love 
the sound of water at the hull 
will dissolve it to longing, 
the mist is thickened by distance, 
the fields, the hour and a lover’s face. 
ebbing from time, 
brine splashes on the face.

The last stanza is particularly revealing:

beyond the border  
is the country of difference.  
ready to be renewed  
or made different,  
there’s no eternity to it. 73

In asserting that nothing is forever, the speaker tacitly implies that places and their identities are malleable (‘ready to be renewed / or made different’), that they are not preserved in time and that it is the present time and place that matters (‘now, this is everything’). The verbs ‘dissolve’, thickened and ‘ebbing’ suggest the evanescence of memory, landscapes and experiences. That immortal, utopian place where ties with nature ensured a harmonious world may have once existed but as the title of another poem implies, ‘the tide is out’ and ‘the beach is crowded / with ghostly inhabitants of the mind’.74
In addition, the speaker’s wanderlust, ‘the easy gypsy of his personality’ (‘at the airport’), and ‘listless legs’ (‘going away’), attests to a much more complicated and decidedly multi-territorial world picture. In analysing the bonds between peoples and places, ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood asserts that ‘the goal of place-conscious and place-sensitive culture need not dictate a place-bound, stationary lifestyle of monogamous relationship to just one place, organised around singular ideals of attachment and fidelity’. Here, Plumwood suggests a decoupling of place and cultural/national/racial identity which enables a more cosmopolitan or transnational approach to environmental responsibility. Mitchell Thomashow argues in his essay on cosmopolitan bioregionalism: ‘When people search for their roots, they recognize the depths of their uprootedness. They discover that their affiliations are broad and vast, not necessarily linked to any specific place, but rather a constellation of places’. I posit that Muhammad’s representation of place indicates a much wider affiliation and network of places as reflected in his solidarity with other islands, continents, cities and villages, for example, Hawaii, Kauai, America, Rome and Firenze: places which figure in his poetry and which have obviously shaped him in some way. Lawrence Buell suggests that environmental responsibility does not necessarily come with long-term residence in a place: ‘does environmental citizenship really hinge on staying put?’ He points out that people carry their places with them wherever they go and that human adaptability suggests that new homes can be found anywhere in the world. The point is that earth-honouring lifestyles are determined by the individual and not by place.

Earth-honouring lifestyles may also not be determined by time. It is important to note that although Muhammad may lament the dilution of perceived older, traditional links with the land, he reckons that the dilution has been underway for a long time. In ‘on a dry bund’, the memories of childhood places when the world was ‘open and green’ is also tinged with sensuous memories of ‘grease from the dredge / and the smell of engines’ along with ‘the acrid berembang on a child’s morning tongue’ and ‘gentle sweetness of young nipah fruits’ which together ‘give life to [the speaker’s] citified senses’. The use of technology in the modernisation of farming methods had already become part of his childhood life in the country. In his seminal work The Country and the City, Raymond Williams argues that an escalator effect takes place in the English nostalgia for a pastoral and organic Golden Age. The escalator moves through time and each succeeding generation perceives the preceding one as having lived a life closer to nature. As such, there is no single Golden Age but several ‘successive Old Englands’ in the long history of the changing English landscape with each generation perceiving the earlier one as the untainted, ‘traditional’ Old England replete with wholesome rural virtues the
meaning of which keeps changing with the times. In the same way, Muhammad imagines the gradual deterioration of the Malay utopia occurring as far back as the period of the ‘ancestral’ Malays narrated in the Sejarah Melayu. The palace-commissioned Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals, a work which blends myth and history, chronicles the genealogy of Malay rulers from Malacca, the source of their greatness and, by extension, the greatness of Malay society. Muhammad has re-worked the tales contained in this classic text in a volume of poems also entitled the sejarah melayu. Ruzy Suliza Hashim notes that Muhammad’s re-centering of the original tales of the Sejarah Melayu gives voice to the marginal court dwellers: a voice which ‘highlights the ills of exploitation, manipulation and corruption’ and ‘questions the mechanisms of inequality which destabilize the state’. In the ‘prologue’, warnings are given about the dangers of succumbing to corruption and artifice in the court or city. The court or the city was the centre of native society and if that is corrupt, then the rest of society will also suffer corruption. The speaker entreats the bard to write of the time when ‘we were a great empire and always heedful’ and ‘oblivious to the meaning of might’. Courtly intrigue, ambition, tyranny, greed and vanity will be the downfall of the state, and

melaka was lost a long time ago
the portuguese are but last soldiers
to a country split
by its own merchants
... we are our own enemies.
laws were bent for the king’s favourites
...
the rapacious happily sell land
to the enemy who paid in gold (‘chapter thirty-four’).

What is noteworthy in the re-worked tales is how the well-being of the state and community depends on equality and morality symbolised by water and river:

speak of the justice
of the raja, prince and minister
offer the evidence of
how dignity, greatness and majesty
grew from the waters of equality,
and the waters desecrated by slander,
or darkened by shadows
of the kings or ministers
who stand before mirrors,
will kill all,
rot the palace floors,
overturn the thrones,
and flow into the people’s wells,
in the city or distant villages.

with all your talent
paint pictures of how power is more like a mist
quickly fading and vanishing
what is essential is a river, the reliable water,
love of the people
and a responsibility that flows
within the conscience.86

In this poem, moral decay is implicitly associated with environmental pollution and injustice: a tacit association which reverberates throughout Muhammad’s poetry. To a large degree, Muhammad envisions himself as the bard of the ‘prologue’ and assumes the responsibility of exposing imbalances of power and the corresponding ecological injustices while drawing attention to the river and what it signifies to the community. The Malay term for homeland is tanah air, literally ‘land water’ which suggests a vast, fluid geographical formation of seas, river basins, landmass and islands of the Archipelago upon which the modern Southeast Asian nation states are now superimposed. As such, the river/water is a very important trope in Muhammad’s environmental imagination, not only because of its centrality in the history of the region and the country but also because of its connotations of transnational watersheds, civilisation, fertility and growth. Its degradation is the hallmark of the ecological crisis of our time: ‘the city encircles/ a thin existence, / a river of acid flows near at hand. / it’s not possible to build a civilisation / on the promises of trade or barter / or over the mine’s sand’ (‘this too is my earth’).87 By implication, the river (both metaphorical and actual) and ‘waters of equality’ as the foundation of the nation are offered as the corrective to oppressive hierarchies and inequalities in the nation-space: ‘what is essential is a river, the reliable water, / love of the people / and a responsibility that flows / within the conscience’.

It can be further argued that Muhammad’s Malay aesthetics are not necessarily confined to ‘Malay’ spaces but speak a broader, universal language of humanity. In his more overtly environmental-minded poems, the emphasis is on how a new ethics of place should be instated in order to deal with the present-day crisis. His poems on deforestation,
tourism, pollution and exploitation have current global resonance: for example, in ‘fishermen’, the speaker notes, with a hint of contempt, the ‘urban indifference’ of tourists who watch the ‘sun-blackened [fisher]men’ mending their nets on the beach, before returning to their ‘air-conditioned hotel’. As argued earlier, the poetry often highlights the ruin brought about by power which rests in the hands of the wealthy and by global economic forces which assume the form of the ruthless businessman and the ‘bloated logger’ (‘the forest’s last day’) in collusion with the complex industrialism and capitalism they represent. Environmental historian Clive Ponting notes that European colonial domination of the world after 1750 had a drastic impact on global ecosystems and economy the effects of which are still felt today in postcolonial countries. The foundations of inequality were laid in colonial times. The soil-degrading plantation and cash crop economies found throughout Southeast Asia today are the result of colonialism; even after 1945, newly independent countries were unable to break away from the economic dependency on the same limited cash crops. The sheer inequality (and related ecological non-sustainability) evident in today’s global economy which favours industrialised countries and the affluent is represented in Muhammad’s work by the veneer of wealth that the speaker sees in the city and the reality of poverty in the midst of this ‘wealth’:

luxury is thinly brushed
on the hotel’s aluminium,

... each time i meet a businessman
stiffened by a tie, i also meet
a dust-coloured beggar
in the lanes of slums.
many are rich
in the country of the poor (‘return’).

Deploying the trope of environmental apocalypse, Muhammad has his speaker decry ‘the red dessicated desert – / the world of the future’ (‘the forest’s last day’) as he foresees an arid and barren future for the postcolonial land.

The challenge of bringing about sustainability in the midst of such pressures includes adaptive strategies such as the greening of cities. In the face of rapid socio-economic changes, the poet acknowledges in ‘the city is my home’ that in spite of its toxicity, ‘this city is my home, / these buildings my walls, / these streets my floor / and the people my family.’ In ‘this too is my earth’, the speaker declares that ‘this [city] too is my earth / though its face is plated in plastic / rushing to the
rhythm of the machine’ and he tacitly exhorts the city-dwellers to green the city:

i want to sing
of life with the earth’s song,
 loud in the farms and morning earth,
 listening to birds in tall trees,
...
i want winds from the valley
to flow through my windows,
...
i want my earth fecund
black with life’s essence.
this too is my earth,
 whose soul and ways
must be rendered tender.94

Tellingly, in this poem, Muhammad places the city and the village within the same frame and in that way conflates the racialised, monocultural village space with the arguably more cosmopolitan, plural and inclusive metropolis that is now his home, and its people his family. Such an ethics of place (expressed in the exhortation to treat the city-home-earth with tenderness) has the potential to transcend a solely racial place-sense and belonging.

By way of a conclusion, the relation between place, race and environment as represented in Muhammad’s poetry reveals ambiguities and contradictions and an implicit struggle to reconcile ideas of Malay-ness and Malay place-sense with the plural cultural and place identities that make up the nation. It is edifying to note that in his National Laureate acceptance speech, the poet asserts that: ‘Our literature too needs to be more intellectual and relieved from the nostalgia and yearning for a lost world. We should be less preoccupied with being immersed in sad emotions or hatred’.95 These ‘sad emotions and hatred’ are not elaborated on, but it can be surmised that they have to do with the trauma of colonialism, cultural denigration, economic exploitation, environmental degradation and other changes that have affected the Malays before and after political independence. It is perhaps the freedom from the ‘yearning for a lost world’ and these upsetting emotions that can prompt the writer to finally engage with the nation in its present and urgent realities: not just Malay but Malaysian, rooted and yet diasporic, inherently heterogeneous, multicultural, globalised, transient, complicated and environmentally compromised. Suffice to say that writers like Muhammad play a vital role in writing the nation and national identity, and in the course of this, found new ways for
people to perceive, treat and relate to place and environment. In Muhammad’s work, it is the trope of the river and its equalising waters which is particularly useful in promoting not only environmental awareness but also a non-hierarchised and inclusive space for all the tanah air’s inhabitants both human and nonhuman.

University of Malaya

Notes


2 Huggan, “‘Greening’ postcolonialism’, p. 701.


12 Ibid., p. 31.

13 Ibid., p. 39.
Agnes S. K. Yeow The poetry of Muhammad Haji Salleh

16 Muhammad Haji Salleh, Rowing Down Two Rivers (Bangi: PenerbitUniversiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000), p. 244.
18 Muhammad, Romance and Laughter in the Archipelago, p. v.
20 Muhammad, Rowing Down Two Rivers, p. 235.
21 Ibid., p. 160.
23 Ibid., pp. 233, 236, 234.
24 Ibid., p. 116.
26 Ibid., p. 62.
27 Ibid., pp. 160–1.
28 Ibid., p. 243.
29 Ibid., pp. 193, 183.
31 See Joan Martínez-Alier, The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2002).
32 Muhammad, Rowing Down Two Rivers, p. 218.
33 Ibid., p. 129.
34 Thumboo (ed.), The Second Tongue, p. 98.
37 Muhammad, ‘Interview’, pp. 21, 16.
38 Muhammad, Romance and Laughter in the Archipelago, p. v.
40 Ibid., p. 122.
42 Muhammad, ‘Interview’, p. 15.
43 Muhammad, An Introduction to Modern Malaysian Literature, pp. xv–xxv.
44 For instance, the concept of reinhabitation in Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, ‘Reinhabiting California’, Ecologist, 7 (December, 1977), pp. 399–401.


48 Rob Nixon, ‘Environmentalism and postcolonialism’, p. 239.


50 Arguably, the notion of the ‘real Malay’ was an attempt by the colonial authority to define what or who constitutes the Malay race or nation in the midst of the myriad ambiguous identities of the eastern archipelago. Incidentally, Sir Frank Swettenham, scholar administrator, wrote a book entitled *The Real Malay: Pen Pictures* (London: J. Lane, 1900).

51 Muhammad, *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, p. 198.

52 Ibid., pp. 237–8.

53 Ibid., p. 118.


55 In Malaysia, those counted as ethnic Malays are accorded ‘bumiputra’ status; the term translates into ‘son of the earth’.

56 Muhammad, *Romance and Laughter in the Archipelago*, p. 46.

57 Ibid., p. 45.


59 Muhammad, *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, p. 239.

60 Muhammad, *Romance and Laughter in the Archipelago*, p. 45.


62 Ibid., p. 244.


64 Muhammad, *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, pp. 239, 241.

65 Ibid., p. 151.

66 Ibid., pp. 240–1.

67 Ibid., p. 43.

68 Ibid., p. 67.

69 Ibid., p. 194.

70 Ibid., pp. 221–2.

71 Ibid., p. 41.

72 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 182, 181.

73 Muhammad, *Rowing Down Two Rivers*, p. 216.

74 Ibid., p. 211.


76 Ibid., p. 152.

80 Ibid., pp. 64, 71.
81 Muhammad Haji Salleh, The Travel Journals of Si Tenggang II, p. 25.
84 Muhammad, Rowing Down Two Rivers, p. 74.
85 Ibid., p.109.
86 Ibid., pp. 75–6.
87 Ibid., p. 124.
88 Thumboo (ed.), The Second Tongue, p. 98.
89 Muhammad, Rowing Down Two Rivers, p. 51.
91 Muhammad, Rowing Down Two Rivers, pp. 242–3.
92 Ibid., p. 51.
93 Ibid., p. 154.
94 Ibid., pp. 124–5.
95 Muhammad, ‘Our People Must Sail the Seas of the World’, p. 214.